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AF/E FOR MARIA BEYZEROV

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: MAURITIUS: EMERGING CREOLE MOVEMENT SURPRISES TRADITIONAL
POLITICAL PARTIES

SUMMARY

¶1. The May 1 Labor Day political rallies not only confirmed Paul Berenger's Mouvement Militant Mauricien (MMM) party's rise in popularity, but it also brought the Creole Community under the spotlight. Father Jocelyn Gregoire's Federation of Mauritian Creoles (FMC) rally drew a larger crowd than all three main political parties, thereby taking them by surprise and heightening public interest. Meanwhile, the courtesy that the Labor Party and the MSM showed towards each other during their respective rallies points to an alliance in the making; even as the rise of FMC could change party strategies.

FMC STEALS THUNDER

¶2. On May 1, the Creole Roman Catholic Priest and President of the Federation of Mauritian Creoles (FMC), Father Jocelyn Gregoire, gathered 20,000 people in the MMM bastion of Rose Hill, dwarfing the numbers of all three main political parties. The crowd, comprised mostly of Creoles from all walks of life, gathered to listen to Gregoire's message of hope and empowerment. According to media reports, the MMM drew the biggest crowd among the political parties (10,000), followed by the Social Alliance (8,000) and the Mouvement Socialiste Mauricien, or MSM, (4,500).

¶3. FMC's Labor Day rally is a follow up to the October 2007 meeting where 30,000 people gathered to mark International Creole Day, and to show support for the federation's work: Gregoire exhorted Creoles to stop blaming the State, the private sector, or the Catholic Church for their current situation, and urged them to take responsibility for their own wellbeing.

¶4. The FMC intends to be a lobby group for Creoles' rights and will lobby any government in power, said Gregoire. The federation claims that among its members, there are Creole and Franco-Mauritian politicians from the MMM, MSM, Labor Party, Parti Mauricien Social Democrate (PMSD), and Union Nationale. In an April 27 interview Gregoire insisted that "the federation's voice will be heard in all possible political instances."

FMC OBJECTIVES DENOUNCED AS DISCRIMINATORY

¶5. The FMC has a number of goals, including that the Constitution be amended to recognize Creoles as such, vice the current generic term of "General Population;" that the Creole language is recognized as a language and is taught in schools, just as English, French and Hindi; that the government establish night schools, opened to all communities, for school drop-outs and adults; and that 35 percent of public service employment be reserved for Creoles. In his April 27 interview, Gregoire said that FMC aims to redress the injustices sustained by Creoles since independence and that it does not intend

to deprive the other communities of their rights.

¶6. Senior journalists like Raj Meeterbhan and Ministers such as Minister of Information Technology, Etienne Sinatambou, commended Gregoire in local press reports for bringing together Creoles from all walks of life. Ironically, other religious lobby groups who operate under the cover of socio-religious organizations denounced Gregoire's actions and the federation's objectives as discriminatory. For example, in his political rally, Cehl Meeah, Leader of Mauritian Solidarity Front (MSF) (which was once named "Hezbollah"), accused FCM of being communalists (L'Express, Friday May 2, 2008) and Sumduth Dulthumun, President of the Mauritius Sanatan Dharma Temples Federation (MSDF), said on a private radio interview that FMC's objectives were anti-patriotic and that the FMC's action could fragment Mauritian society (Radio Plus, Friday, May 2, 2008).

MMM'S REGAIN OF POPULARITY CONFIRMED

¶7. As expected, the Labor Day rally confirmed the MMM's rise in popularity. On April 2, a London-based global market research and information group, TNS-SOFRES, published a survey which revealed that 27 percent of Mauritians interviewed would prefer to have Berenger as Prime Minister. For the first time since the last published survey six months ago, Berenger is ahead of Prime Minister Navin Ramgoolam (26 percent).

¶8. Meanwhile, the courtesy shown by the Labor Party and the MSM towards each other implied an alliance in the making. Both Ramgoolam and Pravind Jugnauth, MSM's leader, centered their attacks

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on the MMM and Paul Berenger. According to local press, during his speech Jugnauth hinted that his father, the current President of the Republic, may make a political come-back at the end of his presidential mandate. There have been rumblings about President Jugnauth's return to the political arena for months. In April 2008, for example, President Jugnauth's wife mentioned his possible return to the political forum in a radio interview.

COMMENT

¶9. The rise of FMC underlines the potential for Creole influence; Creoles have claimed for a long time that they are taken for granted by the MMM. There have been other notable Creole movements, but the FMC differs from them in two distinct ways. First, the FMC clearly identifies specific and concrete demands on behalf of the Creole community. Second, the FMC comes at a time when, for the first time since independence, the Creoles stand as a more clearly defined political force. With the FMC's growing influence, the Creole bloc may become a viable voting bloc in the next elections. The April 2 TNS-SOFRES survey shows that a strong majority of the 31 percent of Mauritians in favor of an MMM-MSM alliance come from Creole and Muslim communities. The survey suggested, on the other hand, that a potential Labor Party-MSM alliance would garner its majority support from the Hindu community. Given that FMC has widespread influence and a membership that spans all of the major political parties, however, their movement could be a game-changer. Creole voters may be an active voting bloc in the next elections, and political coalitions may court them more than before.

BLASER